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Chemical plant security

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For years, Sen. Jon Corzine (D-N.J.), Rep. Frank Pallone (D-6th Dist.) and others have been warning that voluntary security measures aren't enough to protect America's thousands of chemical plants from terrorists. Suddenly, the White House is listening.

Acting Homeland Security Undersecretary Robert Stephan told a congressional panel last week that although most chemical companies have eagerly cooperated with security efforts, more is needed.

This could be an encouraging conversion for an administration that consistently has buckled to industry lobbying against mandatory security standards. But the conversion won't be genuine unless the White House supports tough legislation.

It's not at all clear that will happen. Stephan didn't offer specifics but merely said the administration wants the "right mix" of safeguards.

He and Congress don't have far to look. Shortly after 9/11, Corzine and others offered a sensible plan that includes a comprehensive system to review plant security and make upgrades where needed. The most dangerous of the 15,000 plants that store serious amounts of chemicals would have to meet higher standards first. Most important, firms would have to switch to safer chemicals or procedures where possible.

Security experts consider chemical plants among America's most likely terrorist targets, with 123 of them so dangerous that a catastrophic release at any one might kill 1 million people. That includes seven in New Jersey.

Corzine may not be in the Senate after this fall's gubernatorial election. But he is helping put together new chemical security legislation with Sens. Susan Collins (R-Maine) and Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), respectively the chairwoman and ranking minority member of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

That bodes well for a strong bill. And that is the only kind that will minimize the chances of terrorists turning an industrial plant into a ready-made weapon of mass destruction.

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